1988

"Asskicking" and edification :

Michael Butler
Lehigh University

"ASSKICKING" AND EDIFICATION:

THE FINE LINE IN THE FICTION OF WALKER PERCY

By

Michael Butler

A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate Committee

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

English

Lehigh University

1987

This thesis is accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

1-19-88

(date)

James R. Frakes

Professor in Charge

Chairman of Department

Contents

Abstract

We can infer from Walker Percy's novels the author's view of fiction and its job. For instance, from Will Barrett's therapist, Dr. Gamow, and his brand of verbal therapy, which textual clues suggest is very much like the practice of fiction, we see that fiction can heal, can save its reader from the ills of everydayness and the emptiness of language. Informed by Percy's epistemology as presented in The Message in the Bottle, we see that fiction can also be a means to see the world. These and other models consistently imply that fiction, though intended for a reader, is not intended to be didactic. This conclusion is reinforced by negative examples found in Percy's fiction, examples of writers like Mort Prince who preach and whom Percy berates. Together Percy's fiction and non-fiction indicate that the novelist is to be, in Binx Bolling's words, an "asskicker" or reader-prodder who stimulates, warns and questions but does not answer or direct.

At his best Percy himself fills the role of asskicker very well. In the scene of Jamie Vaught's baptism he forces his reader's attention to the issue of faith but undercuts the potentially miraculous aspects of the episode with the disgustingly earthy, leaving his reader to decide whether faith or death has triumphed. In fact, only through the

author's non-fiction can his attitude toward the conclusion of the novel be ascertained. In Lancelot and The Moviegoer Percy also skirts didacticism, in the former by ranting through a murderous madman and thereby denying authorial views a persuasive voice, and in the latter by ending the novel ambiguously. Percy successfully employs these two techniques other times as well but possibly fails to do so in Love in the Ruins and The Thanatos Syndrome. Love in the Ruins, unlike The Moviegoer, is not at all ambiguous in its conclusion; More turns to God and seems, unlike Lance, a decent role-model. In The Thanatos Syndrome More returns but the real problem is that he faces opponents and issues about which the reader can feel only one way, as Percy does.

Introduction

Walker Percy is a man in an unusual predicament. He believes, as a Christian, that he has heard the Good News of man's salvation but also believes that it is not his place to preach. Faced with the imperative needs of his fellow dwellers in the late twentieth century and armed with the message that should, if well given and taken, make them rejoice, he is, however, bound by the constraints of high art, by a personal conviction that he does <u>not</u> speak with God's authority, and by the rather dismal realization that his Good News has been pretty well diluted by preachers of the last two thousand years. His task then is not to tell but to retell, and in the retelling to avoid didacticism. Such a task might well drive a former doctor back to the relatively simple realm of diseased bodies. Percy, however, has tackled the spiritual woes of his age and, to many minds, very effectively.

In this paper I will explore the novel as Percy sees it and as he has used it within the constraints of his artistic and religious creeds. Though to explore an author's vision of the novel and to gauge his success in realizing that vision sound ridiculously ambitious enterprises, I intend to pursue them within the bounds of a very narrowly defined

interest, the question of Percy's didacticism. And, though I will draw evidence from most of Percy's works to answer this question, I hasten to stress the eclecticism of the practice; I will survey Percy's corpus for what seem most illustrative examples but make no pretense of coming to terms with any one work in a thorough way.

My plan is first to survey Percy's fiction for inferential indications of his view of the novel and of the voice with which he speaks and to compare findings with Percy's more direct statements in his essays and interviews. Then I will return to the fiction to ascertain the extent to which Percy practices what he preaches, considering the degree of authority with which his views (as defined outside the novel) are presented within the novels and the degree to which his notoriously open endings are, in fact, open.

Chapter 1:

Percy's Vision of the Novel

Percy's second novel, The Last Gentleman (1966), seems to begin twice. Its action, of course, actually commences in the first section of the first chapter: "One fine day in early summer a young man lay thinking in Central Park"(11). But with the end of the strange interlude related in the first section, the narrator suspends the events of the present until the end of the first chapter, where a colon, occupying its own line of text in the middle of the page (39), signals a return to the present. The interim narration provides background information about the "young man" of the first line, including his name and the history of his psychotherapy, apparently necessary for us to understand Will Barrett as he "set[s] forth into the wide world at the age of twenty-five"(39), and the novel begins in earnest. This preface, however, may be not only the narrator's means to prepare the reader for Will's story but also the author's means to establish an understanding with his reader about the novel that is about to ensue.

Consider Percy's great attention to Will's meeting with his psychiatrist, Doctor Gamow. Will summarizes Doctor Gamow's style of therapy:

> The engineer [Will]... had a high opinion of his analyst and especially liked hearing him speak. Though Dr. Gamow was a native of Jackson Heights, his speech was exotic. He had a dark front tooth, turned on its axis, and he puckered his lips and pronounced his r's almost like w's. The engineer liked to hear him say neu-wosis, drawing out the second syllable with a musical clinical Viennese sound. Unlike most Americans, who speak as if they were sipping gruel, he chose his words like bonbons, so that his patients, whose lives were a poor meager business, received the pleasantest sense of the richness and delectability of such everyday things as words. Unlike some analysts, he did not use big words or technical words; but the small ordinary words he did use were invested with a peculiar luster. "I think you are pretty unhappy after all," he might say, pronouncing pretty as it is spelled. His patient would nod gratefully. Even unhappiness is not so bad when it can be uttered so well. And in truth it did seem to the engineer, who was quick to sniff out theories and such, that people would feel better if they could lay hold of ordinary words.
>
> (33-34)

Aside from its humor, the passage is remarkable for drawing together the worlds of psychotherapy and fiction. The common bond, of course, is words, tools of both psychiatrist and author. It is enforced by Gamow's brand of therapy, which amounts to the stylish use of language. The passage is clearly relevant to the practice of psychotherapy, a legitimate interest of Percy's.[1] But its implication to the practice of fiction can't be missed either. Specifically, though Gamow's example hints that the tools of the novelist-- the ability to "lay hold of ordinary words," and to articulate problems and unhappiness-- are

useful to the analyst in his role as healer, it also suggests that the role of healer is appropriate to the novelist.

The association of novelist and psychotherapist is strengthened as Will again reflects on Gamow:

> It was easy to believe that... he served his patients best as artificer and shaper, receiving the raw stuff of their misery and handing it back in a public and acceptable form. "It does sound to me as if you've had a pretty bad time. Tell me about it." And the unspeakable could be spoken of. (35)

Again the therapist is borrowing the tools of the writer, who is "an artificer and shaper" and who makes a life of rendering the peculiarities of the human condition in "public and acceptable form." Again, the likeness also implies that in so doing the writer has been a healer all along.

This notion is, of course, not new. Novelists are often seen as diagnosticians of the societies in which they write. The jacket blurb of the Avon paperback of <u>The Moviegoer</u> touts Percy's novels as "brilliantly conceived dissections of contemporary life." William Dowie, considering <u>Lancelot</u>, concludes, "Thus Walker Percy, M.D., uses the most drastic of medical treatments, the knife, to expose the moral stagnation of American life"(Broughton, 259). These rather glib credits, though, like many in which

writer is likened to physician, recognize only the diagnostic function of fiction, what we might unmetaphorically call its social insight. They picture the author as "analyst" in the strictest sense. Percy, however, at least hints in the person of Doctor Gamow that words can not only reveal but also heal.

The illness that both Gamow and Percy seek to heal is the malaise that the existentialists identify as everydayness. It is the bad feeling that seems to accompany the good living of the twentieth century. Percy probes it in the introductory essay to his Message in the Bottle (1975), "The Delta Factor," where he asks:

> Why does man feel so bad in the very age when, more than in any other age, he has succeeded in satisfying his needs and making over the world for his own use? (MB 3)

Percy's answer to the question is of book length (it focuses on man's having more or less conquered the world but then finding himself left over and unaccounted for, with his tools of accounting, words, exhausted by years of use). But he stumbles much sooner on a possible cure while considering the case of a malaise-stricken commuter:

> Why does it make a man feel better to read a book about a man like himself feeling bad? (MB 5)

The reason, as Percy later explains, is that "there is no

such thing, strictly speaking, as a literature of alienation"(MB 83). By "strictly speaking" Percy must mean "if the effect of writing on a reader is to be considered." His point is that, though alienation is a workable topic for fiction and an alienated hero is not difficult to present, a reader encountering such a figure will react either with befuddlement (if he doesn't know alienation) or with a feeling of kinship and shared experience (if he does know it). In one sense the phenomenon represents a technical difficulty to the novelist: "How to make my reader feel alienation?" In another, however, it is a therapeutic windfall: "By presenting alienation, I cure it!" The second implication is that in which Gamow and, if there is indeed a connection, Percy are more interested.

The model of the novel, then, that emerges from Dr. Gamow's writer-like practice of psychotherapy indicates that an author writes to his readers in an effort to transcend alienation, to articulate, and so mitigate, unhappiness, and to restore for them the value of the word. If we consider Will's satisfaction with Gamow, his indication that the Doctor's stylish pronunciation is, in fact, efficacious, then the genre would seem up to the task. An example of healing fiction from Lancelot (1977) supports the conclusion as well:

> I was moderately happy. At least at the moment I was happy. But not for the reasons given above [wife, wealth, social status, and record of personal achievement]. The reason I was happy was that I was reading for perhaps the fourth or fifth time a Raymond Chandler novel. It gave me pleasure (no, I'll put it more strongly; it didn't just give me pleasure, it was the only way I could stand my life) to sit there in old goldgreen Louisiana under the levee and read... about Philip Marlowe taking a bottle out of his desk drawer in his crummy office in seedy Los Angeles in 1933..[2].
> (25)

Isak Dinesen may have been right in her assertion that "All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them"[3] -- even the sorrow of living the good life in modern America.

The model of the novel as a form of therapy is not the only one that emerges from the first chapter of The Last Gentleman. The text also hints that fiction can be an instrument through which a reader might view his world. To appreciate properly the value of such an instrument, realize that to Percy modern man seems all but blind. Like everydayness, his blindness represents a symptom that fiction can cure, but since the means by which it is cured are different than those Dr. Gamow employs, it suggests a model of the novel distinct from the instrument of healing.

Again as if establishing the context within which the novel is to operate, Percy inserts section 5, the incident in the art museum, into chapter 1. In it he confronts

modern man's inability to see (or the modern world's inability to be seen):

> He [Will] had noticed sometime ago.... In here the air was thick as mustard gas with ravenous particles which were stealing the substance from painting and viewer alike.... The particles were turning the air blue with their singing and ravening. Let everything be done properly: let one stand at the correct distance from a Velazquez, let the Velazquez be correctly lighted, set the painting and viewer down in a warm dry museum.... What is wrong with that? Something, said the engineer, shivering and sweating behind a pillar. For the paintings were encrusted with a public secretion. The harder one looked, the more invisible the paintings became. (28-9)

The day is saved when a man working at a skylight comes crashing ("KeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeRASH"[29]) to the floor of the museum. After the initial shock, the man and other bystanders are seen to be uninjured.

> It was at this moment that the engineer happened to look under his arm and catch sight of the Velazquez. It was glowing like a jewel! The painter might have just stepped out of his studio and the engineer, passing in the street, had stopped to look through the open door.
> The paintings could be seen. (30)

Percy explains the engineer's problem seeing the Velazquez and the solution to the problem in his essay "The Loss of the Creature," where one of the creature's greatest problems is loss of the thing, that is, inability to come to terms with elements in the world around him. Percy's example is the Grand Canyon, which, because of its packaging

(the travel brochures, guides, carefully stationed observation decks, and the unmatchably high expectations that result), is rendered inaccessible. The canyon might be savored only if a tourist accidentally stumbles off the prescribed track or if in some disaster the whole constructed context comes crashing down (like the worker at the skylight), leaving the man alone with the canyon.

The problems that Percy catches in the phrase "the loss of the thing" have a double relevance to the workings of the novel. First, given man's difficulty seeing his world, it would seem appropriate that the helpful novelist undertake to make his work an aide in perception. Secondly, given that the novel is itself a thing in the world of the reader, the writer must aim to save his work from its own extensive packaging (which ranges from the jacket blurb to the overwhelming mass of expectations that will cloak the book if it is taught in the classroom as "literature").

Though Percy suggests no means to insure the visibility of the novel itself, he does suggest, at least indirectly, a place for the novel in the dilemma of the blinded reader. Consider an observation about observation that Will makes before the fortuitous crash of the workman and skylight:

> Sometime ago he [Will] had discovered that it is impossible to look at a painting simply so: man-

> looking-at-a-painting, viola! [sic]--- no, it is necessary to play a trick such as watching a man who is watching, standing on his shoulders, so to speak. There are several ways of getting around the ravenous particles. (28-9)

This means of "getting around the ravenous particles," that is, "watching a man who is watching," suggests an enterprise very much like novel reading. In one sense, The Last Gentleman is Walker Percy's reaction to the same world in which his readers live. Reading his novel, then, is like watching him watch the world. If Will is right, The Last Gentleman should then offer us a clearer view than our own first-hand perceptions. In a second sense, Will, not Percy, is the watcher we watch in reading The Last Gentleman. Percy's novels channel the experience of the fictional world through a single consciousness, for instance, buffeting an amazed Will Barrett from episode to episode and recording his reaction for the reader. As Percy's picaresque scheme sends Will traveling down the East Coast from Levittown to Val's camp, it seems that the bowlers of Pennsylvania and auto dealers of Mississippi are the real focus of the story and Will just the lens through which they reach us. This is especially true when Will is filling the role of English detective, invisible but alert to all around him.

In considering the loss of the thing in "The Loss of the Creature," Percy presents two means by which the self

might recover the thing. They, like Will's trick of watching a watcher, suggest ways in which we can understand the function of the novel. Percy's means:

> First by ordeal: The Bomb Falls; ...the simulacrum of everydayness and of consumption [is] destroyed. Secondly, by apprenticeship to a great man.
> (MB 60)

Though the first possibility, a disaster akin to the skylight accident in the art museum, would seem to have few (and mainly unpleasant) implications for the art of fiction, the second, apprenticeship to a great man, might well summarize the experience of the careful reader of a conscientious writer. The great man in Percy's example is a researcher who happens by a sophomore dissecting-room and with his genuine fascination for the dogfish under examination bypasses the prescribed procedure, the technical language, in short the blinding packaging, and reaches the fish, at once allowing the students to see it as well. So too might a novelist, with sufficient enthusiasm and a clear enough vision of the world (the standard by which Percy has implicitly defined his "great man"), not only see the world but allow his reader to also.

Here the peculiar effectiveness of fiction needs to be stressed. Though we might say that reading Percy's essays constitutes as much an apprenticeship to greatness as

reading his novels or that it too is like watching a watcher, Percy's essays lose something in their directness--or at least should if Percy's epistemology applies. What they lack is a trick. In a world where meaning must come in echoes and reflections, must be snuck up on and surprised, essays are too direct and overt to be the best expressions of most ideas. They leave a reader face to face with meaning that has clearly been served up for his comprehension; that is, they make him victim to packaging. Comparing Percy's fiction and nonfiction, Patricia Poteat notes:

> We shall find that so long as he employs the tokens and follows the pretensions of the storyteller's language game, Percy is consistently successful at "getting around the ravenous particles." (59)

Poteat implies (and earlier stated) that Percy's essays are not successful at "getting around the ravenous particles." Though I disagree with her judgment, I find her view interesting since it seems to me that exactly by "playing a storyteller's language game," Percy does get around the particles. Most of Percy's essays, in fact, rely on one or more stories as illustrations. Others, especially the book-length self-help quiz, Lost in the Cosmos (1983), approach meaning as obliquely as any fiction. My goal is not to argue the relative merits of Percy's fiction and

essays but to indicate that storytelling, whether in a novel or essay, is by virtue of its indirectness an effective means of communication.

Another distinction of fiction emerges in light of one of Percy's greatest misgivings about modern man and his perception of his world, that is, the Cartesian split that rends both. Specifically, modern man is sick, says Percy, because he sees himself as mind and body, rather than as integrated self. The resulting angelism/bestialism leaves man, like Sutter Vaught, shifting unhappily between the immanent and transcendent, flights of philosophy and pornography. To the extent that the novel is an instrument through which man views his world, it is both susceptible to this dichotomy[4] and committed to resolving it. It achieves this resolution, if at all, by integrating the abstracted truths of the essay and the raw material of the real world into what might crudely be called an extended example or, more respectfully, real meaning. In "Metaphor as Mistake" Percy suggests the appropriateness of metaphor as a means of human perception:

> But we do know, not as the angels know and not as the dogs know, but as men, who must know one thing through the mirror of another. (MB 82)

To the extent that the novel is metaphor, equated with our world yet quite different from it, it may be the

peculiarly human way to see.

The various features of the novel as an instrument through which the reader views his world crystallize nicely into the image of the telescope, the instrument through which Will views his world. The first time Will uses the telescope it proves itself an effective weapon against the blinding particles of the everyday:

> He focused on a building clear across the park and beyond Fifth Avenue. There sprang into view a disc of brickwork perhaps eight feet in diameter.... He slapped his leg. It was as he had hoped. Not only were the bricks seen as if they were ten feet away; they were better than that. It was better than having the bricks there before him. They gained in value. Every grain and crack and excrescence became available. Beyond any doubt, he said to himself, this proves that bricks, as well as other things, are not as accessible as they used to be. Special measures were needed to recover them.
> The telescope recovered them. (32)

In section 4 the same bricks were all but lost in everydayness:

> ...another beautiful day and <u>augh</u> there it was again: The Bronx all solid and sullen from being the same today as yesterday, full of itself with lumpish Yankee fullness, the bricks coinciding with themselves and braced against all comers. (28)

And, lest we attribute both the elusiveness of the bricks and efficacy of the telescope to Will's mental

unbalance, we should note Jamie's delight at the telescope:

> There was no talking to Jamie this morning. He must watch the tugs on the river, roller coaster at Palisades Park, the tollhouse on the George Washington Bridge, two housewives back-fencing in Weehawkin. (66-67)

The telescope has plunged into the heart of New Jersey, The Everyday State, and rendered it visible-- just as Percy has, by recording the encounter in his novel. The likeness of novel to telescope is not limited to the common purpose of viewing the world; it extends to the means by which the two instruments effect this end. Will says, "It was as if the telescope created its own world in the brilliant theater of its lenses"(12), much, we might say, as a novel creates a world for us to view.

Furthermore, the real power of the telescope is to focus on a very narrow part of the world. (Will's difficulty in seeing bricks is not their distance; he could hold one in his hand, but looking through the telescope "was better than having one there before him.") So too does the power of the novel lie in its focus. Whereas "The Delta Factor" asks, "WHY DOES MAN feel so sad in the twentieth century?" <u>The Last Gentleman</u> pursues the problems of Will Barrett in New York (and specific other locations) in 1964. As Lance observes, "The narrower the view the more you can

see"(L 1).

The many models of the novel that I have surveyed (falling mainly within the bounds of novel as a form of therapy and as a means by which the reader may see his world) do not form a single coherent picture. Nor, I think, need they, since the concepts of the novel as a means to heal and to allow a good look at the world are at least not mutually exclusive. Of the many features of the novel, however, that can be abstracted reasonably from Percy's fiction one is consistently and entirely absent: there is no indication that fiction carries a message.

Consider Doctor Gamow's practice, likened earlier to a novelist's. Though Gamow's therapy is mainly verbal, it provides no answers. Gamow heals or helps by enunciating his patients' difficulties. The style on which he relies to do so effectively, is itself non-directive, merely an unusual habit of pronunciation. It seems we should conclude then that the novelist who lifts a reader from alienation by speaking of that alienation can be likewise non-directive.

If we turn to the model of novel as instrument of observation, the indications are the same. A telescope does not shape or shade that upon which it is focused; it merely brings the subject into visibility. Furthermore, Doctor

Gamow cautions Will against expecting too much from the telescope:

> "You also recall that this great thirst for the 'answer,' the key which will unlock everything, always overtakes you just before the onset of one of your fugue states?" (37)

The desire for the "answer," then, is both destined to go unsatisfied and an unhealthy symptom. Extending the parallel between Gamow the healer and Percy the author and between Will the patient and us readers, we might take Gamow's statement as an authorial warning not to expect the answer from fiction.

Even if we consider the novel as an apprenticeship to a great man through which we may come to see the world, our model does not suggest that we will therefore leave our apprenticeship subscribing to the views of our mentor; rather it suggests we will leave with a healthy share of the wonder that allows him to see. Percy says his great man is usually "a little vague and humble before the thing," as opposed to a lesser knower, who "is never vague and never humble before the thing; [who] holds the thing disposed of by the principle"(MB 61). A novelist, then, if a great man, does not create worlds that illustrate his formula of man but holds man up to his own and his reader's amazement. Furthermore, the experience by which a student might with the help of the great man come to see demands not only the

sovereignty of the thing at which he looks but also

> a sovereignty of the knower-- instead of being a consumer of a prepared experience, [he is] a sovereign wayfarer, a wanderer in the neighborhood of being who stumbles into a garden. (MB 60)

That the knower (or reader) must be sovereign logically accompanies Percy's complaint that the common man has forfeited the right to know his world to various classes of experts. It indicates that the novelist is not to be another expert who hands down findings to his reader but at most a helper and co-knower, perhaps the tender of the garden into which the wayfarer stumbles.

The absence in these examples from Percy's fiction of suggestions that the novel bears a message is really very remarkable since they do strongly suggest that the novel is written to a reader (rather than as art in a vacuum or for the benefit of only its creator). In fact, it is difficult to dissociate the idea of rhetorical fiction (written with reader in mind) from didactic fiction (written with a message for a reader in mind). However, the models of fiction as non-directive therapy and as an epistemological trick do just that. Even more convincing, though, than the absence of didacticism from these models is the presence and clear undesirability of it in other examples.

Such an example would seem to be Mort Prince, the author who with Forney Aiken, the "pseudo-Negro" photographer, heads south to write a story on "the behind-the-scene life of the Negro"(LG 107). Will remembers in great detail a novel of Prince's that he had read some years ago:

> [it was] about a young veteran who becomes disillusioned with the United States and goes to Italy in quest of his own identity. It is in Europe that he discovers he is an American after all. The book ended on a hopeful note. Mark comes home to visit his dying father, who is a judge in Vermont. The judge is a Yankee in the old style, a man of granite integrity. Now he too, Mark, knows who he is, what he must do, and that all men are his brothers. In the last chapter he climbs High Tor overlooking the valley. If a man does nothing else in life, said Mark to himself, he can at least tell one other man (that all men are brothers) and he another and he in turn another until at last amid the hatred and the dying all men shall one day hear and hearing understand and understanding believe. Mark had come home. Arising from High Tor, he picked up his coat and turned his face to the city. (114)

The passage is both brutal and hilarious. We might wonder, though, why Percy includes it. Certainly it indicts a whole class of writing and the character of Mort Prince before he even appears, but does either object of satire need help to appear ridiculous? The parody may be more meaningful if we consider that, freed of its sentimentality and the flattening effect of summary, Prince's novel is very much what we could mistakenly take Percy's to be. It

examines the question of personal identity, a central concern of Percy's, and finally adopts interpersonal understanding as a route to belief, an agenda rather appropriate to Percy. It is different from Percy's novel, then, and is maligned by Percy, not for the morality it espouses, but for espousing a morality at all.

Percy's attention to "This I Believe," the radio show that Binx listens to in The Moviegoer (1961), similarly indicates his disapproval of art used as a vehicle for the inculcation of the artist's views. On "This I Believe"

> Hundreds of the highest-minded people in our country, thoughtful and intelligent people, people with mature inquiring minds, state their personal credos. (89)

On the evening Percy describes, the guest speaker is a playwright, who broadcasts a creed sounding very much like distilled Mort Prince, ending, as Prince's novel might were it in the first person,

> "I believe in believing. This-- I believe." (90)

Percy intermixes Binx's ironic commentary ("The two or three hundred people I have heard so far were without exception admirable people"[89]) with the already offensive substance of the show to present proselytizing in a very bad light. It is worth noting that the playwright's closing line, an affirmation of faith, summarizes rather well what we know Percy, a Christian, to believe. Percy, however, has made it

Such an example would seem to be Mort Prince, the author who with Forney Aiken, the "pseudo-Negro" photographer, heads south to write a story on "the behind-the-scene life of the Negro"(LG 107). Will remembers in great detail a novel of Prince's that he had read some years ago:

> [it was] about a young veteran who becomes disillusioned with the United States and goes to Italy in quest of his own identity. It is in Europe that he discovers he is an American after all. The book ended on a hopeful note. Mark comes home to visit his dying father, who is a judge in Vermont. The judge is a Yankee in the old style, a man of granite integrity. Now he too, Mark, knows who he is, what he must do, and that all men are his brothers. In the last chapter he climbs High Tor overlooking the valley. If a man does nothing else in life, said Mark to himself, he can at least tell one other man (that all men are brothers) and he another and he in turn another until at last amid the hatred and the dying all men shall one day hear and hearing understand and understanding believe. Mark had come home. Arising from High Tor, he picked up his coat and turned his face to the city. (114)

The passage is both brutal and hilarious. We might wonder, though, why Percy includes it. Certainly it indicts a whole class of writing and the character of Mort Prince before he even appears, but does either object of satire need help to appear ridiculous? The parody may be more meaningful if we consider that, freed of its sentimentality and the flattening effect of summary, Prince's novel is very much what we could mistakenly take Percy's to be. It

examines the question of personal identity, a central concern of Percy's, and finally adopts interpersonal understanding as a route to belief, an agenda rather appropriate to Percy. It is different from Percy's novel, then, and is maligned by Percy, not for the morality it espouses, but for espousing a morality at all.

Percy's attention to "This I Believe," the radio show that Binx listens to in The Moviegoer (1961), similarly indicates his disapproval of art used as a vehicle for the inculcation of the artist's views. On "This I Believe"

> Hundreds of the highest-minded people in our country, thoughtful and intelligent people, people with mature inquiring minds, state their personal credos. (89)

On the evening Percy describes, the guest speaker is a playwright, who broadcasts a creed sounding very much like distilled Mort Prince, ending, as Prince's novel might were it in the first person,

> "I believe in believing. This-- I believe." (90)

Percy intermixes Binx's ironic commentary ("The two or three hundred people I have heard so far were without exception admirable people"[89]) with the already offensive substance of the show to present proselytizing in a very bad light. It is worth noting that the playwright's closing line, an affirmation of faith, summarizes rather well what we know Percy, a Christian, to believe. Percy, however, has made it

clear that it is not for playwrights (or, we might venture, novelists) to broadcast personal beliefs.

Percy voices his views on the novel, novelist, and reader most pointedly in "Notes for a Novel About the End of the World":

> I do not conceive it my vocation to preach the Christian faith in a novel, but as it happens, my world view is informed by a certain belief about man's nature and destiny which cannot fail to be central to any novel I write. (MB 111)

Percy's qualification is at first disturbing, suggesting, it would seem, that all intentions aside, a Christian novelist is going to preach. The centrality of Percy's Christian world-view, however, seems less a problem if we consider that all novelists write from world-views that are necessarily central to their novels and that a great number of them have never been accused of preaching.

In the same essay Percy suggests roles other than preacher that the good novelist might fill. The topic of his essay, apocalypse, naturally leads him to focus on the role of doomsayer:

> The novelist writes about the coming end in order to warn about present ills and so avert the end. Not being called by God to be a prophet, he nevertheless pretends to a certain prescience. If he did not think he saw something other people didn't see or at least didn't pay much attention to, he would be wasting his time writing and they

> reading. This does not mean that he is wiser than they. Rather might it testify to a species of affliction which sets him apart and gives him an odd point of view. The wounded man has a better view of the battle than those still shooting. The novelist is less like a prophet than he is like a canary that coal miners used to take down into the shaft to test the air. When the canary gets unhappy, utters plaintive cries, and collapses, it may be time for the miners to surface and think things over. (MB 101)

A careful reading of Percy's statement is vital if we are to assess the extent to which the novelist is to carry a message, prophetic or otherwise. We could easily imagine that the public service of proclaiming the end of the world or, worse yet, attempting to avert the end of the world could turn didactic. Prophets, after all, rarely fail to couple an emphatic "Repent and be saved!" to their diagnoses of doom. And often prophets have peeves. A modern Catholic might well have something to say about standards of sexual behavior and the rights of the unborn and the very old, as Percy undoubtedly does. Other parts of Percy's statement, however, indicate that the novel is not where he voices these opinions. Consider, for instance the caveat "This does not mean that he [the novelist] is wiser than they [his readers]." If not, then the novelist must, despite his privileged (or painful) point of view, defer to the wisdom of his readers once he has turned their minds to work. The image of the canary reinforces this conclusion. As Percy

defines it, the canary/novelist is an alarm, the highest end he can achieve, to get the miners/readers to "surface and think about it."

Concluding "Notes for a Novel," Percy again turns to the question of the novelist's job. The Christian writer, "having cast his lot with defunct Christendom and having inherited a defunct vocabulary"(MB 118), has only one recourse:

> He does the only thing he can do. Like Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, he calls on every ounce of cunning, craft, and guile he can muster from the darker regions of his soul. The fictional use of violence, shock, comedy, insult, the bizarre, are the everyday tools of his trade. .... Perhaps it is only through the conjuring up of catastrophe, the destruction of all Exxon signs, and the sprouting of vines in the church pews, that the novelist can make vicarious use of catastrophe in order that he and his reader may come to themselves.
>
> Whether or not the catastrophe actually befalls us, or is deserved--whether reconciliation and renewal may yet take place--is not for the novelist to say. (MB 118)

The final sentence is a re-abdication of the role of prophet. It says that even when the novelist announces that society is flawed and that the world is near its end, his service to society is not the dissemination of the truth (since it doesn't matter if the world should or does, in fact, end). His real service, as the canary image suggests, is to provide a stimulus to his reader, (hence the tools:

"violence, shock,..."); his real goal, for "he and his reader [to] come to themselves."

This designation of the writer's job meshes very nicely with the indications from The Last Gentleman that the novel serves both to heal the reader and to make his world visible to him. The stimulus the writer's tools provide awakens the reader from the lethargy of everydayness, which both constitutes a spiritual ill and veils the world from him. The negative examples of Mort Prince and "This I Believe" also support the model of writer as stimulator. Prince and the radio show both err in pushing their ready answers to life and the world. The novelist, however, is merely to prod and, as Percy says in in "Notes...," provides no answers:

> It would seem that the novelist's aim is to muddy and complicate. (MB 108)

We might, in summarizing Percy's view of his own job, turn back to his fiction for an image that seems to distill the various elements we've defined. I'll borrow the image from Binx Bolling, narrator of The Moviegoer, though not on the assumption that Binx speaks for Percy or that The Moviegoer is autobiographical but merely recognizing that, as implied author of the novel, Binx may have something to say about his job that's relevant to his creator's as well.

Opening his epilogue, that is, closing the novel, Binx writes:

> As for my search, I have not the inclination to say much on the subject. For one thing, I have not the authority, as the great Danish philosopher declared, to speak of matters in any way other than edifying. For another thing, it is not open to me even to be edifying, since the time is later than his, much too late to edify or do much of anything except plant a foot in the right place as the opportunity presents itself--if indeed asskicking is properly distinguished from edification.
> Furthermore: I am a member of my mother's family after all and so naturally shy away from the subject of religion. (187-88)

The search about which Binx declines to comment amounts to a search for God or, at very least, for meaning in life. Percy silences his narrator at this point to separate himself from the playwright on the radio who proclaimed "This I believe." He adopts instead the credo Binx then submitted: "I believe in a good kick in the ass. This-- I believe"(90). That is to say, he has adopted the role of writer as stimulator, raising issues, sounding alarms, and with all the cunning of his craft trying to awaken his reader.

It remains only to be seen whether, as Binx wonders, "asskicking is properly distinguished from edification," that is, whether Percy kicks his reader without kicking him in a particular direction. This, more or less, is the

"violence, shock,..."); his real goal, for "he and his reader [to] come to themselves."

This designation of the writer's job meshes very nicely with the indications from The Last Gentleman that the novel serves both to heal the reader and to make his world visible to him. The stimulus the writer's tools provide awakens the reader from the lethargy of everydayness, which both constitutes a spiritual ill and veils the world from him. The negative examples of Mort Prince and "This I Believe" also support the model of writer as stimulator. Prince and the radio show both err in pushing their ready answers to life and the world. The novelist, however, is merely to prod and, as Percy says in in "Notes...," provides no answers:

> It would seem that the novelist's aim is to muddy and complicate.
> (MB 108)

We might, in summarizing Percy's view of his own job, turn back to his fiction for an image that seems to distill the various elements we've defined. I'll borrow the image from Binx Bolling, narrator of The Moviegoer, though not on the assumption that Binx speaks for Percy or that The Moviegoer is autobiographical but merely recognizing that, as implied author of the novel, Binx may have something to say about his job that's relevant to his creator's as well.

Opening his epilogue, that is, closing the novel, Binx writes:

> As for my search, I have not the inclination to say much on the subject. For one thing, I have not the authority, as the great Danish philosopher declared, to speak of matters in any way other than edifying. For another thing, it is not open to me even to be edifying, since the time is later than his, much too late to edify or do much of anything except plant a foot in the right place as the opportunity presents itself--if indeed asskicking is properly distinguished from edification.
> Furthermore: I am a member of my mother's family after all and so naturally shy away from the subject of religion. (187-88)

The search about which Binx declines to comment amounts to a search for God or, at very least, for meaning in life. Percy silences his narrator at this point to separate himself from the playwright on the radio who proclaimed "This I believe." He adopts instead the credo Binx then submitted: "I believe in a good kick in the ass. This-- I believe"(90). That is to say, he has adopted the role of writer as stimulator, raising issues, sounding alarms, and with all the cunning of his craft trying to awaken his reader.

It remains only to be seen whether, as Binx wonders, "asskicking is properly distinguished from edification," that is, whether Percy kicks his reader without kicking him in a particular direction. This, more or less, is the

question my second chapter will seek to answer.

Chapter 2:

Percy's Practice of the Novel

Lest we too readily credit Percy with approaching the novel in the interesting and admirable role of an ass-kicker or reader-prodder, we should note that several critics have implicitly or explicitly assigned him a much more didactic role. William Godshalk, for instance, reveals his assumption that Percy's fiction aims to teach in his commentary on Love in the Ruins. Saying that Tom More struggles to see the world more clearly, Godshalk claims, "Implicitly, Percy instructs us to do the same"(Broughton, 156). Of Lancelot Jac Tharpe notes, "This novel, like all the others, refrains from evangelism, yet it is possibly more anxious than any other about fostering its message of spirituality and renewal"(WP 111). Tharpe's rather dim distinction between evangelizing and anxiously fostering a message of spirituality and renewal suggests that he too sees Percy as preaching. Gerald Kennedy is more direct: "Though Percy disparages 'edifying' fiction, his commitment to a Christian eschatology inevitably binds him to a didactic program and governs his representation of experience" (Broughton, 135). It would seem, according to Kennedy, that it is impossible for a Christian writer not to preach.

In light of the first part of this paper these critical sentiments would seem to indicate either that I have misread Percy's intentions, that these critics have misread Percy's fiction, or that somewhere between his intentions and fiction Percy himself has faltered. Certainly each of these possibilities is in part true. For all Percy's similes on the role of the writer, our understanding of his intentions ultimately depends on our sharing perfectly his understanding of the word "edify." For Percy's part, he would certainly be unique among writers (and other people) if he enacted perfectly all his intentions. However, it seems to me that to a large extent the critical consensus that Percy preaches is due to the common critical approach to Percy's work, that is, to read his fiction very much in light of his nonfiction.

For instance, considering the conclusion of The Moviegoer, Walter Sullivan finds: "But this is not all for Walker Percy is a Catholic, and the death of Lonnie endows the conclusion of the book with a Christian dimension" (Rubin,342). Likewise, Tharpe quotes a character from Love in the Ruins (367-68) and then assesses, "If Percy is an orthodox Catholic, he would consider this nonsense invincible ignorance and an impossible parody of the idea of wanting, watching, and waiting"(WP 82). Tharpe writes of

The Moviegoer:

> When Percy says Binx does not wish to be the honorable man he means by implication that Binx refuses to be the honorable man alone and not also the Christian. And what religion he would have chosen would of course not be in doubt, since the writer is a Roman Catholic writer. (WP 59)

These quotations, only a sampling, betray a clear preoccupation with Percy's Catholicism. This preoccupation is not essentially biographical, but reflects a common approach to reading Percy's novels. Specifically, many critics evince (some, I suspect, unconsciously) greater concern for the meaning of Percy's fiction to Percy than its meaning to his readers. Though there is nothing objectively wrong with this approach, it seems ill-suited to deciding the issue of didacticism, which after all is a matter of how an author addresses an audience.

For this reason, in exploring the question of whether or not Percy's fiction is didactic, I will attempt to consider its effect on a reader. However, the effect of Percy's fiction is not easily distinguished from that of his non-fiction. That is to say, if a reader feels Binx has converted to Christianity at the end of The Moviegoer and knows Percy is Catholic, might he not, like many critics, be reading Percy as much as he is the novel? Without access to a pool of virgin Percy readers whose response to Percy's fiction would be a true indication of its directiveness, we

might best assess Percy's fiction by adopting the virgin point of view ourselves, by forgetting that Percy is Catholic, that he is informed by Sartre and Kierkegaard, and that he is often enraged by the liberality of contemporary morality. If we forget successfully, we stand to gain two insights: first, into the nature of Percy's fiction--whether, independent of preconceptions, it, in fact, preaches; and second, a fairly realistic picture of how Percy's novels work outside the closed circle of critics, since to the extent that The Thanatos Syndrome outsells The Message in the Bottle, Percy's average reader knows him only through his fiction.

Since a comprehensive treatment of Percy's fiction is impossible and its conclusion (that Percy more often than not preaches or doesn't) would not be useful, my approach will be to look closely at aspects or sections of several novels that show Percy notably succeeding or failing in his attempt to stimulate without directing. To lend direction to this survey, I'll look first at issues that would seem occasion for didacticism, belief in God and social morality, and then at Percy's use of his characters, who are ultimately the means through which he could effect didacticism.

The baptism of Jamie Vaught at the end of The Last Gentleman clearly raises the question of faith. As Jamie is dying, Will, the confused engineer, is charged by Jamie's sister Val to baptize him. Caught between Val on one side and Sutter on the other, and faced with responsibility for Jamie's soul (if he has one), Will is forced, it would seem, to stand for or against faith in God and His sacrament. Critics familiar with Percy's outlook on life are prone to conclude that since Jamie is baptized, Will has affirmed God and pulled the reader, who has fallen into very sympathetic association with him, into the same affirmation. Needless to say, their reading implies a form of didacticism. It relies, however, on some rather privileged insights.

Consider the circumstances of the baptism. It is performed by Father Boomer, the hospital chaplain, who "was more like a baseball umpire in his serviceable serge, which was swelled out by his muscular body"(310) than like a priest. Percy continually undermines Father Boomer in his role as priest, that is, denies him the dignity the office would seem to demand, beginning with his name, which comes almost as a joke. Later he says Boomer "Bent lower still, storekeeper over his counter, and took the narrow waxy hand between his big ruddy American League paws" and spoke "in the same flat mercantile voice"(316), making him seem only

about business as usual, divested of any aura of spirituality or even specialness. Furthermore, Boomer is continually subverted by Sutter's skeptical presence. For instance, when he suggests a "conditional baptism" (since Jamie may have been baptized before), Sutter prods, "'is that what the canon prescribes, Father?'"(312).

Nor is Father Boomer the only part of the baptism scene that seems awkwardly designed if the scene is supposed to steer a reader to faith. The potentially glorious focus of the ceremony on the spiritual, the birth of the soul and its heavenly future, is strongly undercut by the smelly immediacy of the body. As Father Boomer is about to ask Jamie if he wishes to receive the sacrament, the boy rushes to the toilet:

> After a moment there arose to the engineer's nostrils first an intimation, like a new presence in the room, a somebody, then a foulness beyond the compass of smell. This could only be the dread ultimate rot of the molecules themselves, an abject surrender. It was the body's disgorgement of its most secret shame. Doesn't this ruin everything, wondered the engineer. (313)

Then, as the priest is about to baptize the boy:

> Jamie's bowels opened again with the spent schleppen sound of an old man's sphincter, The engineer went to get the bedpan. (315)

The interruptions are not only indecorous but state rather forcefully the concreteness of the body and its mortality. The effect may be to spark hope for spiritual immortality,

but the scene seems to assert more forcefully the reality of flesh and death.

This is not to say that Jamie's baptism cannot be read as a triumph of the spirit and of its agent, Father Boomer. To do so we need only see the scene from Percy's perspective, first remembering his familiarity with Kierkegaard and his distinction between genius and apostle. According to this distinction the powers of intellect that validate a person in the world are irrelevant to God's work, for which the only qualification necessary is God's sanction. Clearly, Sutter and the emaciated resident who tends to Jamie are geniuses in Kierkegaard's sense and foils to Father Boomer, an apostle. Given this understanding, Father Boomer's shortcomings serve only to highlight his single strength, the only strength relevant to the situation, that he is a priest, anointed by God.

Nor should Jamie's defecation bother us. After all, Percy is a doctor, and the details are only realistic. Furthermore, they may be the answer to Percy's question:

> How can one possibly write of baptism as an event of immense significance when baptism is already accepted by and large as a minor tribal rite somewhat secondary in importance to taking the kids to see Santa? (MB 118)

The earthy distractions of the scene are actually, then, intended that we might see the miracle they interrupt (but

not cancel)--to see it, in fact, as we never could in the pristine terms we've come to expect.

Furthermore, it might be said that Father Boomer speaks with a simple eloquence. In response to Sutter's barb about the canon, Boomer shows himself equal to the heckler:

> "This young man asked me to come in here... Therefore I should like to ask you, sir, ... whether you concur in your sister's desire that I administer the sacrament of baptism to the patient. If you do not, then I shall be going about my business."
>
> "Yes," said the engineer, nodding vigorously. He thought the priest expressed it very well in his umpire's way, taking no guff from Sutter.
>
> (312)

Boomer's speech is direct and dignified and expresses the apostle's independence from the genius. Later Boomer offers Jamie the Christian faith in the same plain terms:

> "Do you accept the truth that God exists and that He made you and loves you and that He made the world so that you might enjoy its beauty and that He himself is your final end and happiness, that He loved you so much that He sent His only Son to die for you and to found His Holy Catholic Church so that you may enter heaven and there see God face to face and be happy with Him forever."
>
> (314)

When Jamie asks if this creed is true, Boomer says, "'It is true because God Himself revealed it as the truth'"(314). When Jamie asks how he might know that, the priest says, "'If it were not true, then I would not be here. That is why I am here, to tell you'"(314). These

grounds of faith are the same that Percy explains in "The Message in the Bottle." Boomer is the newsbearer, legitimate because of his sincerity and unselfish motive. Jamie is the castaway whose predicament makes the news relevant. And the ultimate foundation of faith, that upon which belief is contingent, is, as Percy says in closing "The Message in the Bottle," "the grace of God." Therefore Boomer does not answer Jamie with an argument or proof but only with his credentials as priest and messenger.

Understood in these terms, Jamie's baptism scene is truly miraculous--both in portraying a miracle and in rescuing it from the everyday (sacraments are, after all, everyday miracles). However, granted even that Percy sees the scene in this way, it is unfair and unarguable to assume that he has imposed the view on his readers. The scene celebrates, after all, a very peculiar faith. How many of Percy's readers, even Catholic readers, know Kierkegaard's distinction between apostle and genius and see Boomer's ordinariness as other than dismal? How many realize (or unconsciously benefit from) the fact that the physical intensity of Jamie's sickness rescues the rite from everydayness? How many do not feel, as Will does, that Jamie's befouling the room has "ruin[ed] everything"? And how many see Boomer as eloquent, his justification of faith

("'If it were not true, then I would not be here'") adequate?

The answers to these questions clearly have very little to do with whatever meaning critics who have read Percy's essays have invested in the scene (unless readers have taken to reading criticism). Nor, in fact, can they be found by looking at the scene itself, which is not a call to Christianity but a nondirective stimulus. It focuses reader attention on the Christian faith, made plain in Father Boomer's creed. Reader response to this stimulus depends on individual predilection to the questions it raises and, as Percy would add, on the grace of God.

Given Percy's faith, we might suppose that he would be tempted to preach not only belief in Christ but also traditional Christian morality. In search of didacticism, we might look then to Percy's treatment of sexual behavior and other social issues about which he should have something to tell the contemporary reader.

Percy has made no secret of his thoughts on the sexual habits of modern Americans. Accused in an interview of treating homosexuals harshly in Lost in the Cosmos, Percy responded:

> Well, I don't recall being any harder on homosexuals than I was on anybody else, or

> heterosexuals. I mean, where was I unkind or uncharitable to homosexuals? Are you talking about the scene in Donahue where the gay promiscuous cruiser goes to Buena Vista Park for his five-hundredth encounter? There is such a thing, after all, as a promiscuous homosexual. But look at the next guy--a promiscuous heterosexual. The next guy is a business man who is a connoisseur of the "lunch-hour liaison." He's heterosexual and sure doesn't come off any better than the homosexual.
>
> (Lawson, 286)

Clearly, whether or not Percy subscribes to the official Vatican line on such matters, he strongly disapproves of the liberality of current behavior.

The issue of sexual morality is prominent in Percy's fiction as well, especially in Lancelot and The Thanatos Syndrome. In Lancelot, in fact, good and evil and Lance's search for one or the other come to be set almost entirely in sexual terms. Lance is awakened to his world by the blood-type designation that tells him Siobhan is not his daughter but the product of his wife's adultery. Later he finds that Margot has taken a new lover, Jacoby, since Merlin, Siobhan's father, and that his daughter, Lucy, has been seduced into a triangle with Dana and Raine, members of the movie company. It is not surprising, then, that Lance becomes obsessively concerned with sexual aberrance, filming the bedroom exploits of his household, violently clutching Margot and Jacoby when he catches them in bed, eventually murdering three people for what he sees as their degeneracy.

Even at the time of the telling, a year after the murders, Lance remains preoccupied with sex and is outraged at the dirty movie ("The 69ers") playing across the street from his cell window.

We might infer that Lance's concern for promiscuity is related to Percy's. However, even if Percy and Lance share both concern and outrage, we cannot conclude that Lance is an instrument through which Percy inspires the same reaction in his reader. In fact, with no knowledge of Percy's views, a reader might sensibly conclude that Lancelot is a parody of right-wing moralism and that Percy intended Lance's victims to seem healthy in their liberation. Upon learning that Percy calls Lancelot "a small cautionary tale"(Lawson, 169) the same reader might feel duly cautioned against Puritanism and hot headedness (or cold rage). The conclusion is unlikely but possible since Lance, insane and homicidal, is simply not functional as Percy's raisonneur. In fact, by introducing his own morality through so undermined a voice as Lance's, Percy has asked the reader either to reject his beliefs or to accept them despite his presentation. The approach is like that in Jamie's baptism scene, where he not only lays aside the manipulative power of fiction but forces his reader to overcome the powerful details of the narrative if he is to find inspiration.

Lance's narrative would seem a good example of the fictional kick-in-the-ass at work. His startling monologue certainly brings the reader's attention to sexual behavior, possibly making an issue from a set of assumptions. Since, though, Lance's solution to the issue is clearly not commonly acceptable, the reader is left to sift the good from the bad and decide where Lance went wrong.

Whereas in Lancelot Percy's views on sexual behavior come to the reader through a discredited voice and are difficult to separate from Lance's reactionary chaff, in The Thanatos Syndrome (1987), where sexual conduct is again important, there is no voice of conservative morality. Ironically, despite the absence of such a voice, The Thanatos Syndrome is didactic. Whereas Lance's raving made sexual conduct an issue for the reader, if not for Lance and Percy, in The Thanatos Syndrome the reader finds himself rooting for Tom More in his battle against people and ideas that can never seem other than evil. Among these people is John Van Dorn, champion of "the sexual liberation of Western civilization" (200). Van Dorn would seem almost to make the sex crusade a two-sided fight in his appeal for open-mindedness:

> Once we get past the mental road blocks of human relationships--namely, two thousand years of repressed sexuality--we see that what counts in the end is affection instead of cruelty, love

instead of hate, right? (302)

The appeal, however, comes in defense of Van Dorn's molesting of children, captured on film and made no more palatable by his drugging the children so that they are smiling in the photos. Associated as they are with his child-molestation, Van Dorn's words, the only argument for the sexual liberation in the book, don't save the cause or Van Dorn but are themselves sullied. So when Van Dorn gets his just reward, is reverted to pongidity by an overdose of his own drug, he carries with him into monkeyhood his whole liberal agenda.

Save the title "straw man," however, for Doctor Bob Comeaux, mastermind of Project Blue Boy and head of the Qualitarian Center at Fedville. Comeaux tries to convince More of the merits of spiking drinking water with heavy sodium, an additive that, as he says, "'cools the superego... which can make you pretty miserable'"(195). Among the benefits he cites from a test on the local population (of which it was unaware) are less crime and homosexuality (rather closely conjoined in his mind), the reversion of women from menstrual to estrus cycles and a consequent drop in unwanted pregnancies, better football teams, and engineering students who no longer need calculators. The possibly interesting question of whether

there might be a chemical route to a better human society, however, can never really surface because Percy has imagined not a best possible-case sort of chemical but one that destroys the brain's verbal ability, that boosts society's statistics by diminishing people to either machines or animals.

Nor is Comeaux much of a spokesman for the project. Both his overly friendly language and personal background show him to be insincere. More remembers that back East in med school "Comeaux" was "Como," the new spelling apparently part of a new and self-created persona. Comeaux is obnoxious as well, driving his points home with thumb pokes in More's back and patronizing More, the society he has drugged (knowing what's best for it), and most of all blacks. He claims of their place in his new society: "We're not talking about old massa and his niggers"(198) but touts what amounts to a step back to slavery on one hand and the African bush on the other. Comeaux, in fact, is the least likable figure in Percy's fiction.

Comeaux is not only the instrument through which Percy discredits the entire imaginary social program before its implications even become clear to the reader, but also his means to land a few jabs at more conventional targets. As director of the local Qualitarian program, Comeaux is

responsible, as More says, for "disposing of infants and old people"(199) whose lives no longer seem worth living. His sanction, a Supreme Court ruling, specifies that life begins with the acquisition of language, somewhere around 18 months after birth. It is clear that Percy sees such a ruling as a reasonable extrapolation of recent attitudes and that he disapproves. He cannot then be blamed for holding up his prediction for reader inspection so that we might decide whether he is, in fact, right and, if so, if we want to change course. To do so would certainly be a good kick in the ass or perhaps a canary's warning that things are not good ahead. To associate his vision of our future with Bob Comeaux, however, is to go beyond a good kick and not to trust readers to evaluate issues on their own merits.

In the end, Percy's asides about euthanasia and, indirectly, abortion are of small consequence to the quality of the novel. However, by predetermining the reader's reaction to Blue Boy and the ends for which it aims, Percy has greatly diminished his work. If More had perhaps not been so resolute in his opposition to Blue Boy, had been more a confused Will Barrett sort, and if Blue Boy had not been so clearly untenable, a degradation of man to monkey, The Thanatos Syndrome might have caused a conflict within its reader. Faced with a decision along with More (as we

are with Will when Jamie looks to him for an answer) instead of being steamrolled, we would have really felt the issue, whether it be to drug the water or put 17-month-olds out of their misery. And if Percy felt the need to tip his hand he could have used Father Smith, as he already has, as a haunting but not clearly editorial voice to warn "Tenderness [presumably Comeaux's paternalistic brand]... leads to the gas chambers"(128). As the novel stands, however, its readers' main worry is whether the police will arrest Van Dorn in time for More to get back to prison before he's missed-- exciting, but not like The Last Gentleman.

A sampling of issues about which we might expect Percy to preach shows, then, that he's had mixed success in keeping his asskicking above edification. The same looks to be true when we consider the way in which Percy uses his main characters. It would seem that a novelist, didactic or not, has two means of communicating to a reader, showing and telling. If didactic, the novelist must either show his readers what to do or tell them, making narrative events into examples, characters into role-models, or his narrators into authorial spokesmen. The principal candidates for spokesmen or role-models are Percy's main characters, since they are both his most visible and heard-from figures and,

in three of four cases, his narrators as well. Of the four, though, we might quickly discount Lance as a channel of authorial direction, given the previous findings that he is neither persuasive enough to lead nor altogether wrong enough to be simply a negative example.

Jac Tharpe indicates that the same, however, is not true of Binx. He says The Moviegoer "is a somewhat pretentious edifying discourse, in part because the narrator is so decisive in his numerous opinions"(WP 46). If Tharpe refers to Binx's opinions on being the perfect consumer, on honeymoon couples from Pennsylvania, or on Mrs. Shexnaydre's dog, I'm sure I like The Moviegoer both pretentious and edifying. If he has some other opinion in mind, I doubt it matters much in light of the one opinion on which Binx is not at all decisive, the conclusion of his quest. Though James Walter places Binx's epilogue "more than a year after his conversion"(emphasis mine)(587) and Tharpe sees "no doubt" that Binx "is on the point of becoming both a doctor and a Christian" (59), the text offers little support for the idea that Binx turns to God. In his epilogue Binx says only that he will say nothing of religion, hardly grounds to assume his conversion. Pages earlier and a year before, he professes a sort of moral purpose, but it doesn't seem particularly Christian:

> There is only one thing I can do: listen to people, see how they stick themselves into the world, hand them along a ways in their dark journey and be handed along, and for good and selfish reasons. (184)

Binx's selfish motives sound, in fact, particularly un-Christian.

Binx's secular creed, his marriage to Kate, and dedication to medicine suggest he has taken up what he calls "The Little Way." Though "The Little Way" first refers to Binx's life in Gentilly, his ironic and detached role-playing in Mrs. Shexnaydre's basement is very different from the commitments he makes at the end of the novel, where he gives up the cosmic search for meaning in favor of a particular girl, a particular job, and the humble ambition of doing a little good. James Walter relates Binx's Little Way, to a philosophy practiced by Saint Theresa of Lisieux (588) and much admired by Percy, who observed in an essay cited by Walter: "The peculiar virtue of New Orleans, like St. Theresa, may be that of the Little Way, a talent for everyday life rather than the heroic deed"(589).

However, Percy's admiration for St. Theresa and the neatness with which Binx exemplifies her philosophy do not imply that <u>The Moviegoer</u> preaches the Little Way any more than it does conversion to Christianity. Without prior knowledge of St. Theresa, a reader realizes neither the

example Binx is following nor that Percy approves. Binx's creed is stated as baldly as Father Boomer's, self- evident and open for judgment. Nor are we tempted to swallow the creed in the rush of a happy ending. Binx's marriage to Kate makes little sense, either rational sense that suggests spouses offer each other mutual benefit and be good companions, or romantic sense, in which love conquers all. It seems a lot like Binx's medical career, founded, inappropriately, on whim. As the novel ends and Binx sends Kate downtown, wrapped in his assurances like a child, we are free to judge his behavior against his own creed of "good and selfish reasons" and that creed against any other we like. Far from being directed, we are stranded, wondering both what happened and how we feel about it.

As it turns out, for Percy this scene implies Binx's commitment not only to the Little Way but also to Christianity. In an interview with John Carr in 1971 he explains:

> In the end--we're using Kierkegaardian terminology--in the end Binx jumps from the esthetic clear across the ethical to the religious. (Lawson,66)

"'Kate,'" he adds, "'missed it, missed the whole thing'"(Lawson,66). Well, apparently Kate was not alone, to judge from Carr's reaction:

> A real flip-out. You never look for that. I look

> and what has he done? This guy is now a Christian! I didn't see this coming.
>
> (Lawson,68)

Percy answers:

> Well, most people didn't see it at all. In fact, most people will deny it's in there. They stand me down. "That's not true. You don't baptize Binx in that book."
>
> (Lawson,68)

The author's testimony indicates, as does a look at the text, that The Moviegoer does not direct the reader to Percy's views. However, it also introduces some doubt as to whether it was supposed to. Despite Percy's statement earlier in the same interview, "Nothing is worse than a novel which seeks to edify the reader"(Lawson,64), he seems here to indicate that only by mistake could we miss Binx's conversion. Percy must, then, feel that a novel can raise a question, make its business a search for the answer, conclude happily with Christianity, and not edify. He may be right. In fact, Wayne Booth would say that he must be just this clear-cut so that his reader can know where he stands and judge him. However, we might ask Percy how he could possibly have violated his precept not to edify if not by constructing a novel this way, unless it be by directly addressing a reader: "Why not turn to Christ?" Maybe Binx's conversion, even if clearly perceived by the reader, would come across as a narrative development, not as an example to

be followed. Since, though, his conversion seems not to be clearly perceived, we might delay the pursuit of this distinction until considering of Love in the Ruins, where Tom More's spiritual rebirth is undeniable.

First, though, we might consider Will Barrett of The Last Gentleman, who is less problematic than either Binx or Tom More. Tharpe, who found Binx "decisive in his numerous opinions," must like Will, who, far from pronouncing on anything, stumbles through the novel in honest confusion. Will, more than any of Percy's other protagonists, fits the model of the watcher we watch (see p.14). As such, the one way he might serve to advance Percy's views is as a feeler with whom we feel, that is, by shaping reader reaction to the events he encounters. But even though the action of the novel comes to us through Will (he is present as an observer in many scenes that could take place without him), he is so consistently befuddled by it that we must form our own opinions if we are to have any at all. The perfect example of the novel at work in this way is Jamie's baptism scene, cited at length earlier. Though Will would seem forced into a position of making religious decisions by Val's mandate to baptize Jamie and Sutter's clear opposition, he manages to escape the incident without commitment and in fact leaves asking Sutter what happened

As the watcher we watch, Will does relay to us the feeling of being put on the spot. Consider the moment after Father Boomer has made plain his creed:

> "Is that true?" said Jamie clearly, opening his eyes and goggling. To the engineer's dismay, the youth turned to him.
>
> The engineer cleared his throat and opened his mouth to say something when, fortunately for him, Jamie's bruised eyes went weaving around to the priest. (314)

The question could not be posed more pointedly to the reader than asked as it is of Will. Nor could the reader have been left more without answer since, as Percy claims, "It [The Last Gentleman] ends, unlike The Moviegoer, with Barrett missing it, ... He missed it!"(Lawson, 67). Since "it" is presumably the miracle that has taken place, a reader who is inspired by it has found inspiration without Will's help.

Tom More of Love in the Ruins (1972) reraises the question first encountered considering Binx, that is: does the conversion to Christ of a main character at the happy ending of a novel constitute didacticism? The answer to this question, rendered somewhat irrelevant to The Moviegoer by Percy's failure to make clear the religious implication of his ending, is critical to Love in the Ruins because More clearly reaffirms his faith as the novel closes. He confesses his sins, attends mass, receives communion, and retires for "a long winter's nap"(379) happy that "It is

Christmas Day and the Lord is here, a holy night and surely that is all one needs"(378).

Of course there can be no universal answer to the question of whether such a conversion is didactic, since merely specifying plot elements cannot define reader effect. For instance, Percy might rewrite Lancelot to end on Christmas Day with Lance returning from mass and saying that all one needs is a holy night with the Lord present, and no one would feel pushed toward Christianity. In fact, Catholic readers might resent having their beliefs besmirched by association with Lance. Likewise, it could be argued, More does not stand in good enough stead with the reader to make his return to the Church seem an example to be followed. William Godshalk, in fact, has devoted an entire essay, "Tom More's Distorted Vision," to More's unreliability and found him to be "a mentally disturbed man.... a psychotic psychiatrist"(155), hardly a role-model. The case against More, however, is not so clear as that against Lance. Writing on the More of The Thanatos Syndrome, Terrence Rafferty finds, as we very well might of his predecessor in Love in the Ruins:

> For all his carefully planted human frailties--a weakness for drink, a hint of scientific arrogance, the occasional stirring of lust in his heart--he's a beacon of superego in the darkness of American culture. (91)

Besides the questionable extent to which the hero inspires emulation, the didacticism of a religious commitment like More's also depends on the terms in which it is presented. More's confession could be likened in many ways to Jamie's baptism, as a miracle in unlikely and perhaps unlikable circumstances. Father Smith, who hears More's confession, is exhausted from twelve hours of fire-watch duty. When More forgets his lines, Smith prompts him, asking the time since More's last confession. Hearing the answer, eleven years, he groans and looks at his watch(373). For his part, More cannot honestly claim to be sorry for his sins (eliciting a frustrated sigh from Smith). He can muster sorrow only for his lack of sorrow. In the end, Smith does not so much forgive More as dismiss his sins as silly. However, despite the humorous circumstances, More's donning sack cloth over his sports coat, and the disturbing conclusion to the scene (children light fire crackers and shout "Hurray for Jesus Christ" and "Hurray for the United States!"), the confession manages a sort of tired dignity. Alert enough for a moment to make sense, Smith tells More:

> "Meanwhile, forgive me but there are other things we must think about: like doing our jobs, you being a better doctor, I being a better priest, showing a bit of ordinary kindness to people, particularly our own families--unkindness to those close to us is such a pitiful thing--doing what we can for our poor unhappy country-- things which, please forgive me, sometimes seem more important

than dwelling on a few middle-aged daydreams."
(376)

In fact, Smith's advice is part of an ending that seems not only to present but to romanticize the Little Way (which, in effect, Smith has suggested More follow).

Ultimately the question, whether the portrayal of More's reconciliation with God is didactic, is a matter of the individual reader's reaction. The same, of course, was true in determining whether Jamie's baptism or Binx's epilogue preaches belief in God or Lance's outrage pushes the reader to a conservative sexual morality. In these cases, however, reader-reaction seems more predictable. In Love in the Ruins Tom More's clear turning to faith and the unclear extent to which his character would influence a reader to follow make a reader's response unguessable. Since it seems worthless to prescribe how a reader should respond and impossible to determine how he does, we might conclude of Love in the Ruins and Tom More's part in it only that didacticism is a very near thing.

If we turn from Percy's main to his minor characters we find that sometimes he manages both to make them stand for potent ideas and to do so without being didactic. He is especially successful in The Moviegoer, where minor characters serve as the reference points in Binx's search

for meaning, each living a particular life and standing for an alternative way of life Binx might choose and for a philosophy we as readers must come to terms with. Among the people held up to Binx and us are Aunt Emily, a classic Southern stoic; Uncle Jules, a very worldly and happy Catholic, and "the only man [Binx] know[s] whose victory in the world is total and unqualified"(31); Mrs. Smith, who has "settled for a general belittlement of everything, the good and the bad"(116) and for whom God is just another "device" for "the canny management of the shocks of life"(115); and Lonnie, a passionately Catholic boy, who dies at the end of the novel. Other less well defined figures pop up: Binx's war buddy, Harold Graebner, who has found a life and a wife in suburban Chicago; Walter Wade, popular man on campus and now in society; and the shadowy and romantic figure of Binx's father, killed in the wine dark sea off Crete with a copy of <u>The Shropshire Lad</u> in his pocket and looking ironically from a photo on the mantel ever since. Of the alternatives pulling at Binx, Aunt Emily pulls the hardest. In fact, she speaks so well that Percy says some readers not only cheer her diatribe against Binx but assume that her creed of "goodness and truth and beauty and nobility"(179) is Percy's own (Lawson,65). Their mistake may reveal a real problem with the novel, that in effect it preaches a belief

its author doesn't even espouse. More likely, however, it reveals only the readers' own predilection toward Emily's views, since her voice is only one of many and clearly not the answer Binx seeks. In fact, when Emily, frustrated, asks Binx, "'What do you love? What do you live by?'"(179), he has no answer at all. He has completed his search, seen all the alternatives, and made no choice. When he does commit himself to a way of life, best summarized as the Little Way, it is neither Emily's nor any other we've seen before, including Lonnie's Catholicism. So, if the reader is prone to follow Binx's lead, he'll end up wondering how much sense Binx's marriage and medical ambitions make (since Binx's answer is not clearly right). If not, he has the choice of a whole gamut of characters in whom he might affirm his own beliefs or from whom adopt some nicely phrased new ones.

Needless to say, Percy has not always managed his minor characters as well as in The Moviegoer. In The Thanatos Syndrome, Van Dorn and Comeaux are presented so heavy-handedly that they make a foregone conclusion of the novel's conflict, as we saw in examining The Thanatos Syndrome on social issues earlier. The characters of The Moviegoer who manage to stand for potent ideas without forcing them on the reader are not, however, Percy's only

achievements. Father Smith and Sutter Vaught, for instance, are both, like Lance, discredited voices who are often also channels for Percy's pet ideas. Sutter, a self-proclaimed pornographer and failure in life, leaves Will in his diaries what amounts to Percy's distilled wisdom on the state of the divided self. He explains angelism and beastialism, immanence and transcendence, and the gap that man straddles, all of which Percy also explains in his essays and interviews. Even the thesis of Sutter's report on post-coital suicide is essentially Percyan. Father Smith, who appears in both Love in the Ruins and The Thanatos Syndrome, is by the second novel in a very precarious mental state; he has permanently secluded himself in a six-by-six fire tower because, among other complaints, he says words have been robbed of their meaning. In the tower he reminisces to More on his experience with Nazi scientists, seemingly without point. Well, the complaint that words have become empty is, of course, Percy's, and the point to the reminiscence becomes obvious when Bob Comeaux starts to look like a Nazi (down to his German car and waltzes). Though Percy could have stated the philosophy he channels through Sutter more directly without didacticism (since the ideas don't really suggest a stand), and though he has circumvented Father Smith's subtlety and been didactic anyway, his indirectness

in these two characters seems healthy. It suggests an appropriate source for authorial opinion, especially the opinion of authors who deny authority: the mouths of madmen. The reader is free to seize upon or discard thoughts so expressed, rather than being enlisted or rather shanghaied into views like Tom More's.

Another healthy sign is what we might call the motif of the unanswered question. Binx's search opens with such a question:

> I cannot even answer this, the simplest and most basic of all questions: Am I, in my search, a hundred miles ahead of my fellow Americans or a hundred miles behind them? That is to say: Have 98% of Americans already found what I seek or are they so sunk in everydayness that not even the possibility of a search has occurred to them?
>
> On my honor, I do not know the answer.
>
> (19)

Binx's question is, of course, not the one his search seeks to answer. Rather it demands of the reader that he consider the relevance of Binx's search to himself. Has <u>he</u>, Binx's fellow American, found what Binx seeks or is he sunk in everydayness? Or is he among the two per cent of Americans who Binx says are atheists? Though Percy's questions are rarely so clearly pointed to the reader, a character's confusion or inability to answer always allows the reader to find his own conclusion or settle for none. So when the possibility emerges that Will might settle into

something like Binx's Little Way with Kitty, the idea is not made questionable merely by his choice of spouses but by his doubts expressed to Sutter:

> "I know you think there is something wrong with it [marrying Kitty, settling in South Ridge, working for her father, and raising a family]."
> "You do?"
> "Yes. I know you think there is everything wrong with it."
> "Nonsense." Sutter laughed. "Would you rather join me here?"
> "No, but---"
> "But what?"
> "But nothing." The engineer rose. "There is nothing wrong with it. Truthfully I see now there is nothing wrong with such a life."
> "Right!"
> "It is better to do something than do nothing-- no reflection, sir."
> "No reflection."
> "It is good to have a family."
> "You are quite right."
> "Better to love and be loved."
> "Absolutely."
> "To cultivate whatever talents one has."
> "Correct."
> "To make a contribution, however small."
> "However small."
> "To do one's best to promote tolerance and understanding between the races, surely the most pressing need before the country."
> "Beyond question the most pressing need. Tolerance and understanding. Yes."
> The engineer flushed. "Well, isn't it better?"
> (300)

Will's doubts finally crystallize into a single question about a former patient of Sutter's, "a Deke from Vanderbilt"(212), successful businessman and father, in fact, exemplar of the Little Way to which Will is about to

subscribe, who one morning instead of going to work stood in his living room and screamed. Will's question, which has apparently been bothering him for the hundred pages since he learned of the Deke, is: "'Dr. Vaught, why was that man screaming?'"(301), Sutter's only answer: "'You won't scream. I can assure you, you will not scream'"(301). This assurance, however, is undermined by Will's final question, "'Is it better not to?'"(301). Having read Percy's "The Man on the Train," we might speculate on the Deke's problem and guess at whether it is better or not to scream, but, given only The Last Gentleman, the reader is left to decide for himself, since Will never comes to a conclusion, nor is it even clear what happens to him when the book ends until we read The Second Coming.

Placing the burden of decision-making, as it does, on the reader, the unanswered question works like a microcosm of the novel as a nonedifying kick-in-the-ass. We might, then, evaluate the extent to which Percy's novels meet the standard he sets for them by judging them as unanswered questions. The Moviegoer, for instance, follows Binx on a search for God or for how to live in His absence and presents in its minor characters various answers he might choose. It is, then, like a multiple-choice question. It ends with Binx committing himself to a life not particularly

like any of the choices we've seen before and not necessarily a conclusion to his quest of which we approve. The Moviegoer is therefore very much like an unanswered question.

The Thanatos Syndrome, on the other hand, does not fit the model very well. That is not to say, though, that it does not pose a question. Early in the novel, before Tom More knows of project Blue Boy and additives in the water supply, he does see its effect on his patients and notes:

> In each case there has occurred a sloughing away of the old terrors, worries, rages, a shedding of guilt like last year's snakeskin, and in its place is a mild fond vacancy, a species of unfocused animal good spirits. Then are they, my patients, not better rather than worse? The answer is unclear. (21)

Unfortunately, the answer does not remain unclear long. Even before the end of the chapter More has posited a loss of self as part of his patients' change and has begun to prefer them the old way. When the loss of self begins to look like a Nazi conspiracy and is traced back to the despicable Comeaux and Van Dorn, all doubt is gone-- that is, all doubt on the part of those readers who didn't know when they picked up the book that "thanatos" means "death." For those who did know the title would seem to have eliminated any possible doubt from the beginning.

To be fair to The Thanatos Syndrome, (and not to

indicate that it is a worthless novel, since it is not), I should note that, though its moral issues are clear cut, it does raise another sort of question. Holding up a set of societal circumstances that are clearly made to seem undesirable, it implicitly asks the reader, "Is this an accurate prediction of where we are going?" This is certainly service enough from a novel, just not so nice as also to be asked, "And is this where we want to be?"

Finally, we might compare Lancelot to the unanswered question, since its adherence to the model is debatable. Lancelot does posit the reader a rather well-defined question in Lance's uncertainty whether "all is niceness or buggery"(143). It is this uncertainty the reader may maintain or resolve, as he likes (even after Lance decides violently that all is buggery), as we found in concluding that Lancelot did not preach sexual morality. Lance's unreliable voice may not, however, save the novel from being quite conclusive on a much bigger question. Consider Robert Brinkmeyer on the novel:

> We are intended to understand that Percival's life is the alternative to Lance's. Particularly significant here is the fact that Percy offers only these two alternatives to the alienated reader searching for meaning. We can either follow the way of a murderer who sees himself as a new and innocent Adam, or we can go God's way. There is no middle ground. Percy's strategy is simple: he forces the reader into a situation where he must choose between Lancelot and

> Percival, but only after he has revealed the ugliness at the heart of Lancelot's approach.... Percy points the reader to Percival.
>
> (Tharpe A&E, 88)

If, then, The Moviegoer is a multiple-choice question left unanswered for the reader, Lancelot would seem an either/or proposition in which one alternative is clearly wrong. We might even support this reading with Percy's view that silence (like Percival's) can be the strongest call. To find, however, that Lancelot is directive (or that it directs us in any way other than away from Lance's particular brand of fanaticism), we must accept Brinkmeyer's assertion that "Percy offers only these two alternatives." But Percival isn't really much of an alternative; we know he disagrees with Lance and might guess the particulars of his stand from his collar, but it is unfair to say a silent character preaches. In fact, we might argue that Percy avoids didacticism precisely by ending the novel where he does, just before Percival tells Lance what he's got to say. Still, though, since the novel leaves the reader at least primed for Percival's news, we might conclude that it, like the ending of Love in the Ruins, is at least close to didactic.

These, then, are some of the highs and lows in Percy's

struggle to walk the fine line between asskicking and edification. I wouldn't presume to pronounce upon his overall success and wouldn't know how (by percentage?), though his wonderful achievements certainly seem to outweigh any shortcomings I've found here. I do hope that these examples of Percy's most successfully filling the role he designates for the novelist (in light of examples where he does not) make that role seem wholly worthwhile. Being prodded by Percy can be quite a good reader-experience. I also hope to have shown the value (though not superiority) of the approach that makes this experience possible, the approach of the reader who knows Percy only through his novels.

Notes

1. Percy has published at least one article in Psychiatry and pursues the issue of verbal- versus drug- therapy at length through the person of Tom More.

2. If Chandler seems an odd example of the modern novelist at his best, consider that in this case his work is the perfect novel of alienation, speaking and erasing it, and that it has achieved the highest goal of therapeutic art: it has saved a life.

3. From "Three Acre Sorrow." I am indebted for this quotation to Patricia Poteat, who makes it the epigraph of her treatment of Percy as storyteller.

4. Broughton explores Percy's own shortcomings to interesting ends in "Gentlemen and Fornicators: The Last Gentleman and a Bisected Reality."

Works Cited

Works by Walker Percy and their abbreviations:

The Moviegoer (MG). New York: Avon, 1980. Reprinted from hardcover edition published by Alfred A. Knopf, 1960.

The Last Gentleman (LG). New York: Avon, 1978. Reprinted from hardcover edition published by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1966.

Love in the Ruins (LR). New York: Dell, 1972. Reprinted from the hardcover edition by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1971.

The Message in the Bottle (MB). New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1976.

Lancelot (L). New York: Avon, 1978. Reprinted from the hardcover edition by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1977.

Second Coming (SC). New York: Pocket Books, 1981. Reprinted from the hardcover edition by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1980.

The Thanatos Syndrome (TS). New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1987.

Works not by Walker Percy:

Broughton, Panthea Reid. The Art of Walker Percy: Stratagems for Being. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979.

Lawson, Lewis A., and Victor A. Kramer, eds. Conversations with Walker Percy. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1985.

Poteat, Patricia. Walker Percy and the Old Modern Age. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985.

Rafferty, Terrence. "The Last Fiction Show." The New Yorker 63.17 (June 15, 1987): 91-92.

Rubin, Louis D. Jr., ed. The Comic Imagination in American Literature. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1973.

Tharpe, Jac. Walker Percy. Boston: Twayne, 1983.

Tharpe, Jac, ed. Walker Percy: Art and Ethics (A&E). Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1980.

Walter, James. "Spinning and Spieling: A Trick and a Kick in Walker Percy's The Moviegoer." Southern Review: 16: 579-90.

Vita

Michael Butler was born November 4, 1964 in Cherry Hill, N. J., to Joseph E. and Helen E. Butler. He was educated at Paul VI High School in Haddon Township, N.J., and at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pa., where he graduated with a B.A. in English and highest honors in 1986. He is presently pursuing the M.A. in English at Lehigh and is a teaching assistant in the Department of English.